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ABSTRACT

Societal trends and related pressures on children have generated a greater need for school support of independent reading, which can help students develop lifetime literacy and prevent school failure and dropping out. Providing opportunities for free reading during the school day is a qualitative way of filling a literacy gap for children. Educators should consider implementing lasting innovations that guide students to become independent, successful learners. The following suggestions provide some insight and direction for implementing independent reading on a long-term basis: (1) consider independent reading in the context of remedying school problems; (2) be aware of complex factors that are necessary for program durability; (3) prevent potential crises that could have a negative impact on the innovation; and (4) use approaches that increase the chances of successfully maintaining the innovation. Genuine cooperation among colleagues is also necessary for a lasting independent reading program because a strong sense of ownership contributes significantly to a sustained commitment. (A one-page resume of highlights of a lasting independent reading program is attached, as are 15 references.) (JK)

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Societal Pressures and the Need for Developing Lifetime Literacy through Independent Reading in the Schools

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The importance of supporting independent reading in the schools has been discussed widely in the literature. Hillerich (1983) recommends that independent reading represent half of the total reading program. Sanacore (1983, 1988) proposes a model in which five-week blocks of instructional time are allocated for independent or free reading in content area classrooms. Similarly, Spiegel (1981) focuses on recreational reading in the schools, and she provides suggestions for incorporating semifree reading into subject matter lessons. Morrow (1986, 1987) also supports the development of voluntary reading habits, and she believes they should begin early in children's lives. Furthermore, in Becoming a Nation of Readers, Anderson et al. (1985) advocate independent reading as a major activity for promoting reading fluency. These theoreticians and researchers are concerned with generating experiences that provide students with immediate literacy benefits and that create within them the lifetime reading habit. This thrust is probably more essential today than at any other time in U. S. history. Because of societal pressures, the need to promote and sustain independent reading in the schools is greater than ever.

Today's Society: A Brief Perspective

Each year, students enter classrooms and focus on related activities and assignments. For many of these children, school routine means emphasizing the basics which

usually translates into reading basal reader stories in ability groups, completing isolated workbook exercises, and becoming involved in other fragmented activities. What these students need is not only guidance in skill development but also immersion in interesting, meaningful books.

This latter outcome, however, is difficult to attain because dominant forces either prevent or lessen opportunities for reading independently and extensively in schools. Foremost is the competency testing frenzy that pressures administrators and teachers into viewing the language arts curriculum from a narrow perspective, thereby highlighting classroom instruction that relates directly to testing outcomes. In New York State, for instance, students are expected to reach specific reference points with the following language arts tests:

Third grade: Pupil Evaluation Program in Reading

Fifth grade: Writing Test for New York State Elementary Schools

Sixth grade: Pupil Evaluation Program in Reading

Eighth or ninth grade (optional): Preliminary Competency Tests in Reading and Writing

Eleventh grade: Regents Competency Tests in Reading and Writing or the Comprehensive Examination in English (optional for students pursuing a Regents Diploma)

Added to this list of requirements are testing mandates in mathematics as well as Regents Action Plan assessments in

other content areas. Most New York schools also administer selected standardized achievement tests to elementary and secondary school students, while most college-bound teenagers compete with the American College Testing Program (ACT) or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Similar pressures exist throughout the United States.

Since boards of education and parents read about testing results in newspapers, it becomes easy to understand why educators feel pressured into stressing basic skills. Teaching skills, however, is meaningless unless students apply them during actual reading. Regrettably, book immersion during the school day is becoming a lost art because too much time and energy are directed toward external testing requirements. (Sanacore, 1988)

Compounding these problems are demographic trends that generate a greater need for school support of independent reading. The home context is much different today than it was two decades ago. More career-oriented parents, a higher divorce rate, and more single-parent households are only a few of the trends that have created disruptions in children's lives. Furthermore, child care is largely mediocre, primarily because of low pay causing high staff turnover. Thus, children who generally thrive on consistency and stability are exposed to different child care workers with varied expectations and styles. If these patterns are as dominant as they appear to be, then schools are faced with the formidable challenge of implementing programs that

prevent, or at least lessen, children's increased potential for failure. Providing opportunities for free reading during the school day is a qualitative way of filling a literacy gap for children, a gap that is likely to widen if unattended over a period of time.

This support is vital because "latch-key" children leave school each day and enter homes with no adult supervision. At the least, they succumb to questionable habits, such as watching too much television, spending too much time on the telephone, and engaging too much energy on other social activities. Minimal effort seems to be expended on the thought-provoking, self-disciplined, and pleasure-oriented task of reading. These children, therefore, lose the immediate benefit of improving their reading performance through daily exposure to reading. As important, they lose the longterm value of developing the habit of reading.

These negative outcomes can lead to higher illiteracy and school dropout rates. Depending on who is defining illiteracy, the United States has between 27 million and 72 million illiterates, and these estimated figures are among the highest of industrialized nations in the world. Added to this dilemma is the unusually high dropout rate in American schools, especially in inner cities. Such pessimistic trends strongly suggest that educators must improve their approaches to preventing, identifying, and remedying young people's communication difficulties. Failure to meet

this challenge will result in a lifetime of frustration for these potential illiterates and for the society in which they attempt to function.

What Can Schools Do?

The competency testing movement, the demographic changes, and the increasing illiteracy and school dropout rates have caused a variety of pressures in young people's lives. Unfortunately, these pressures probably will remain and will continue to detract from students' immediate and future learning. Consequently, schools are confronted with two choices: (1) continue on their present course and thereby contribute to the negative aspects of the societal trends or (2) realize that today's trends are going to remain and that schools themselves must respond in major ways. This latter choice reflects sensitivity, but to be effective, it must also be substantive. Thus, in responding to the problem, educators should consider implementing lasting innovations that guide students to become independent, successful learners. Although highlighting independent reading in the schools is not a panacea, it is a positive step toward helping students develop lifetime literacy. The challenge for administrators and teachers, then, is not only to initiate independent reading but also to sustain or institutionalize this innovation.

By definition, institutionalization refers to innovations that become a durable part of the school program.

They manage to continue "by somehow getting 'built in' to the life of the school." (Miles, 1983) Educators are key players in supporting the duration of worthwhile ideas and therefore can be active forces in seeing that these innovations are "built in" to school programs. Specifically, what can educators do? The following suggestions are not comprehensive, but they do provide some insight and direction for implementing independent reading on a longterm basis.

1. Consider independent reading in the context of remedying school problems.

Since most innovations are aimed at remedying school problems, educators should determine the local problems and should discuss specific ways of solving them. This approach lessens the chances of implementing fashionable ideas whose short life spans have little pertinence to a school's problems. Tanner (1983) provides a striking example of an innovation not fitting a school context. In 1969, the Ford Foundation attempted to apply aspects of the British open classroom to the American inner-city school system. All the optimistic reports about the beneficial aspects of the British programs convinced many American educators that it was the answer to their problems, despite the lack of carefully controlled studies. The open classroom concept reflected less structure which apparently was well-matched to the needs of British children. This concept, however, led to disappointing results, particularly with American

inner-city children who generally needed more direct guidance.

This experience from history (as well as others) supports an argument for linking innovations to specific problem solving. Administrators and teachers can provide such a link at meetings of the Language Arts Curriculum Council, the Principal's Advisory Council, or other professional groups. The beginning focus of these meetings is to clarify the school problem and to suggest solutions in the context of research findings. Fortunately, if the problem concerns the negative impact of societal trends on students' learning, and if the solution considers the systematic development of independent reading, then research to support this thrust is readily available. For example, Morrow (1982) found that children who read independently each day performed significantly better than control groups in both vocabulary and comprehension. Similarly, Lamme (1976) found that children who were exposed to pleasurable books had a greater desire to read. These and other studies provide support for independent reading, but this innovation is more likely to be implemented and sustained if it is linked to curriculum development, budget, staffing, facilities, inservice education, and evaluation. Limitations such as time needed for researching the problem and for training key personnel also should be discussed at professional meetings. These considerations set the stage for bringing about a

lasting independent reading program that fits the school environment.

2. Be aware of complex factors that are necessary for program durability.

Beyond identifying a problem and suggesting solutions, sustaining an independent reading program involves other efforts. Regrettably, these efforts are complex especially as they relate to different school settings. Miles (1983) attempts to clarify this problem by presenting four scenarios based on a study of twelve elementary and secondary schools. (Crandall and associates, 1982; Huberman and Miles, 1982) Although the processes he describes do not relate to independent reading, the approaches to implementation could easily apply.

The most effective scenario consisted of the following factors: a district office administrator applied substantial pressure on educators to carry out a newly developed reading program. This mandated strategy first lowered the educators' commitment, but considerable assistance was provided which upgraded their competence with the innovation as well as their subsequent cooperation. In addition, organizational changes were made, including teacher teaming, pupil rotation, and scheduling. These factors generated more use of the innovation and resulted in a lasting program. "The general picture is one of administrative decisiveness, accompanied by enough assistance to increase user skill,

ownership, and stable use in the context of a stable system." (Miles, 1983, p. 18)

A second successful scenario avoided the mandating of the innovation. Instead, it focused on assisting the educators and building their commitment. The emphasis was on cooperative problem solving and suggestions for implementing the program. The professional staff shared responsibility for making important decisions.

These two scenarios were the most effective in promoting lasting innovations. Even though problems had developed, stability was maintained.

3. Prevent potential crises that could have a negative impact on the innovation.

Job mobility and environmental turbulence are two potential crises that could threaten the longterm quality of independent reading. The former problem concerns educators moving on to new positions either because of career advancement or funding cuts; the latter problem concerns declining student enrollment and budget cuts. Since a successful independent reading program depends on a wide variety of resources, a consistently dependable budget is needed for classroom library corners and related furniture, story books, magazines, comics, content area textbooks, movie stories, filmstrips, and other important materials. Building administrators and classroom teachers must impress upon district office staff the importance of maintaining a budget item that is protected against future cuts. (Loucks and

Zacchei, 1983) Preventive strategies also include providing opportunities for many individuals to share their competence and responsibility. For example, in one successful school where an innovation was carried out, "the decision to create a districtwide management group for the innovation, involving both teachers and administrators, nurtured stability even though the principal and the coordinator were both leaving." (Miles, 1983, p. 19) Consequently, these structural and procedural changes significantly protected the innovation against potential threats, and these factors should be considered during the implementation of an independent reading program.

4. Use feasible approaches that increase the chances of successfully maintaining the innovation.

In sustaining a quality independent reading program, a major factor is strong cooperation that is specifically and continuously related to all phases of implementation. Administrators and teachers are the key players who can stabilize the innovation by directing it toward solving school problems, by providing substantial assistance to all concerned personnel, and by eliminating or lessening threats to durability. Since the most successful scenario (discussed previously) represents a mandated use of ideas, such an approach may be controversial and ineffective. Some schools, for instance, may be staffed with a large number of unionized, mid-life professionals who may resist an authoritarian approach. An alternative strategy would focus on

building commitment for the innovation and on sharing responsibility for implementing it. Thus, the staff develops a greater sense of ownership and is more likely to give support over a period of time.

During the past two decades, I have been involved with a team of consultants in carrying out a variety of language arts innovations at school districts. (Sanacore and Rauch, 1986) One of these lasting innovations concerns efforts to promote lifetime readers. Applying characteristics from a content area model (Sanacore, 1983), the school district approached independent or free reading from a broad perspective. Although this program does not represent all aspects of the previous discussion, it does reflect a feasible application of certain attributes in the discussion.

Initially, the services of the consulting team were sought because the professional staff was sensing a lessening of community support for school programs. A representative committee of administrators and teachers believed that problems in the community were growing and, consequently, were hindering the school district's efforts to teach effectively. The consulting team worked with the district committee in conducting a demographic-type study for both community and staff members. The purpose of the study was to determine if subjective perceptions of the problems were linked to specific findings. The results of surveys, interviews, and observations indicated: (1) an unusually high divorce rate, (2) many single parents were employed

full-time, (3) many parents were unavailable for parent-teacher conferences, (4) an increasing number of school dropouts, and (5) a high percentage of failures on the state competency tests which pressured administrators and teachers into focusing on isolated skills that directly matched the testing requirements.

After analyzing the results, the team of consultants and committee of administrators and teachers made recommendations for improvement. One of these recommendations emphasized the need for building lifetime literacy through schoolwide independent reading. This approach, among others, was considered to be important because the professional staff believed it could support this literacy experience on a daily basis and, thus, could lessen some of the negative trends affecting students' lives. The staff also believed that encouraging independent reading increases the potential for applying skills to actual text, for expanding reading interests, for building prior knowledge (of specific content area topics, general world topics, and rhetorical structures), for improving achievement in subject areas, and for sending a message to all that developing the lifetime reading habit is a major instructional priority.

At all stages of implementation, the professional staff was actively involved. For example, the staff demonstrated a commitment to the philosophy of independent reading and generated related goals, activities, strategies, and materials. The assistant superintendent for instruction provided

an assurance, in writing, that budgetary considerations, a reasonable teacher-student ratio, and all-day staff development sessions would be maintained. The school district's building principals and department coordinators (K-12) also gave support by encouraging teachers to use school funds for appropriate materials and to "build" free reading into the classroom schedule. In addition, these middle managers made positive observations/evaluations of independent reading activities and motivated teachers to discuss their unique methodologies at faculty and department meetings. Interestingly, during the program's five-year duration, one school building closed because of declining student enrollment. Consequently, a principal, an assistant principal, and thirty-five teachers were either excessed or transferred to other schools. The innovation, nonetheless, remained because many individuals shared important decision-making responsibilities and brought their ownership of the innovation to the new environment. Although the school district's approach was not mandated, strong collegiality prevailed during all phases of implementing the innovation, including the nurturing of daily dynamics necessary for continued success.

Summary

Societal trends and related pressures on young people have created a greater need for promoting and sustaining literacy experiences, such as independent reading in the

schools. Initiating this innovation, however, is easier than maintaining it. Beyond the initial enthusiasm and desire for the new program lie months and years of continuous effort. Fortunately, experience and research provide guidance in sustaining this innovation. Key factors are directing independent reading toward solving specific problems, being sensitive to complex factors and their relationship to school environments, preventing threats to longterm success, and using realistic approaches aimed at durability. Genuine cooperation among colleagues is also necessary for a lasting independent reading program because a strong sense of ownership contributes significantly to a sustained commitment. Although these suggestions are not a panacea, they are timely considerations for preventing or lessening students' increased potential for failure.

Highlights of a Lasting Independent Reading Program

I. Aim the innovation toward solving a school problem

   A. Conduct appropriate meetings to claify the problem and to suggest research-supported solutions

   B. Link independent reading to curriculum development, budget, staffing, facilities, staff development, and evaluation

   C. Consider limitations, such as time needed for researching the problem and for training key personnel

II. Be sensitive to complex factors necessary for a lasting independent reading program

   A. Relate successful scenarios from the literature to the particular needs of a school

   B. Decide on the best approach, such as a mandated thrust, a cooperative sharing of responsibilities, or a combination

III. Prevent potential crises that could threaten the longterm quality of independent reading

   A. Maintain a budget item that is protected against future cuts

   B. Encourage many individuals to share their competence and decision-making responsibility

IV. Increase the chances of sustaining independent reading by using workable approaches

   A. Conduct surveys, interviews, observations, etc. to determine if the school's perceptions of the problem are supported by specific findings

   B. Analyze the results and, if possible, associate them with a variety of recommendations, including the systematic development of lifetime literacy through independent reading in the school

   C. Emphasize strong cooperation among the central office staff, the building administration, and the faculty during all phases of implementing independent reading

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